

34



NEWS from U.S. Senator Bob Dole

(R.—Kans.)

New Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C. 20510 (202) 224-6521

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CONTACT: JANET ANDERSON
BOB DOWNEN

DOLE: FURTHER MODIFICATION OF TREATIES IS ESSENTIAL

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Following is the text of a floor statement Senator Bob Dole delivered today:

Mr. President, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee completed mark-up on the proposed Panama Canal Treaties yesterday. Their recommendation of an amendment to the Neutrality Treaty concerning American defense and passage rights through the Canal signalled a major shift on the part of both the Committee and the State Department, regarding modification of the Treaties.

The Amendment recommended by the Committee is, of course, virtually identical to my proposal of last October that the text of the "Carter-Torrijos understanding" be incorporated directly into the Treaty itself -- not as an "understanding," not as a "protocol" or "annex," but as an integral feature of the document we are asked to ratify.

When the Senator from Kansas introduced the same amendments on October 17, there were some who said it was an "obstructionist" tactic. Others said that an "understanding" might be needed to clarify United States defense and passage rights, but that a Treaty Amendment was neither practical nor necessary. Still others -- including the State Department -- said that the Treaties would stand on their own merits and no further alterations were desirable or necessary. I am happy to say that after four months of work by this Senator, as well as others, we appear to have got our point across.

MORE TO BE DONE

But let me emphasize that this initial improvement does not eliminate some of the most troublesome aspects of the proposed treaties. While progress has been made in protecting America's vital interests, the threshold of acceptability has not yet been crossed, in this Senator's view. There is more that can and must be accomplished if the Panama Canal Treaties are to guarantee that future generations do not have to grapple with problems created by these Treaties. My position is not one of obstinacy, but of commitment to the principle that we should not create problems for the long run, by glossing over our misgivings in the short run.

The Senate must still confront the very important issues of the duration of the transition period, our rights to a base agreement in Panama after the year 2000, and whether we are to close our options to construct a new canal outside Panama if we so choose. These and other matters will be thoroughly discussed, I am sure, during the forthcoming Senate Debate.

Finally, I think it is important to note that the Senate's primary responsibility in the ratification process is to determine whether these treaties are in the Nation's best interests -- not whether or not our actions might lead to further negotiations or referendums in Panama. There has developed among some Members, a "preoccupation with the plebiscite problem," to the extent that this has become the foremost point of attention in their Treaty ratification efforts. In making every effort to avoid the necessity of further Treaty negotiations or popular referendums in Panama, the Senate risks the obvious inclination to overlook serious defects and shortcomings in the Treaties. As undesirable as further delays might be to the State Department or the Panamanian government, it is essential that the United States Senate fulfill its obligation to fully "advise and consent" on the substance of the Treaties.

That is why further amendments and reservations may be necessary, and may well be approved by the Senate during the next several weeks. Our attention must remain directed to the long-term consequences of the Treaty, and not to the inconveniences of the moment.